

Rick Campbell

## A Punishing Wind

Enid Shomer. *Shoreless*. Persea Books, 2020.

Walt, the great gray bard, poet of the body and the soul, he who mingled his soul with everyone and nearly everything—pismire, grass, bay, river, mountain and meadow—despite his fine, unmatched singing, his verse is just vague enough, so general and all-encompassing, that we are not sure how often he consummated these vast desires. He didn't caress those lovely young men cavorting in the river; we don't know what he did with his fraternal drinking and singing buddies.

However, Enid Shomer in her sensual and often erotic verse, in her latest book *Shoreless*, and her larger body of work, nine books over the last thirty some years, writes with enough specificity to imagine that she has experienced the sensual life she chronicles. In "Floating Islands," from an earlier book, *This Close to the Earth*, she writes, "I wanted the water / to slow down his desire, I'd said, / so he'd know how a woman feels it / more like a feather drawn / across the flesh than a flame."

Over the long tenure of Shomer's career, her subjects have repeatedly focused on nature, especially Florida's, family, love, and sex. *Shoreless* continues this journey. The book opens with poems about the Gulf, fish, birds, swimming, salt and sun, and the body. Always the body.

If one is going to be an honest poet of the body, and if one writes her verse over a lifetime, then the body will become, as they say in academia, problematic. Or, we might say, it falls apart. Though we have been taught to say speaker and not poet, to not assume that these lines are autobiographical, we also know that usually, in contemporary poetry, they are more autobiographical than not. We can assume that the speaker who endures pain in these poems, who visualizes the absence of it, and admits, "Well I have lived in a punishing wind for many years now"—is indeed, Enid Shomer.

The fourth section of *Shoreless* is titled "The Casual Decay of Stars." Stars do decay, astronomers can confirm, but if we substitute body for stars, and admit that there's nothing casual about the decay rendered in poems that ask, "how could I know at forty I'd walk with a cane," or "In Three Disks, Two Rods and a Dozen Screws," we know we are reading about the poet's struggle to battle her body's

failings and perhaps possibilities. “Villanelle for my Two Spines” is an apostrophe to the titanium spine she hopes will save her from the pain her “real” spine has sentenced her to endure; she addresses the spine she was born with, saying, “O chain of bones, you venomous snake.”

In the final section of the book, Enid Shomer returns to familiar subjects; she moves back in time to “The Old Empire” of childhood and family: Washington, D.C., 1961, Latin V, translating Virgil. She remembers a young girl waiting to be kissed, feels her changeable body’s desire as she imagines the boys of her summer camp a few hundred yards away but untouchable. She can’t avoid loss; her father dies, her mother’s speechless after a stroke.

What is it, or how is it, that we can be shoreless? The sea has a shore—land. Islands have shores—the sea. Life has a shore—death. Is death shoreless, is eternity? Is eternity in or out of time and place? In one of her final poems, “In the Cave,” Shomer writes “I want, I want / what I had, no matter how bad it was.” Is this the last shore? Is the next step when we push off into the sea, kick, paddle, then float toward something imagined, something believed, something, maybe faith? In “On St. George Island,” Shomer shows us where the shoreless might be found when the poet is carried by the Gulf she loves, floated “on its endless hand / until [she] is washing back and forth / clear daughter of the tides.”

In these poems the sensual is not just the realm of the body; often, it is nature that touches and caresses, as in “The surf’s attention to crease and pore, a lover who traded his temper / today for extra hands.” Whitman’s heart might be fluttering.